

EU BIODIVERSITY POLICY POST-2010 – EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES FOR SAFEGUARDING BROADER ECOSYSTEMS

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Whilst the prevention of the loss of biodiversity remains high on the EU agenda, there is also a growing interest amongst stakeholders in the possibility of post-2010 EU biodiversity policies, being more focused on the protection and sustainable use of overall ecosystems and their ecosystem services (EC 2010, Council of the European Union 2010). The reason for this is that it is increasingly recognised that long-term human wellbeing is dependent on healthy ecosystems and their services. In particular, as pressures from climate change increase, healthy ecosystems are increasingly seen as an essential part of the adaptation to their impacts. The discussion paper by IEEP and WWF explores what kind of broader, more ecosystem-focused approach to EU biodiversity policy would entail, how it could be best build on existing policies and initiatives, and what the possible implications (e.g. risks and benefits) of adopting such a regime could be. The paper concludes that the adoption of a more ecosystem-based EU policy regime for biodiversity could bring benefits, but it needs to be carefully considered. Such a regime might help to increase public and political support for biodiversity protection and thereby improve the implementation of EU biodiversity policies (e.g. by highlighting significant synergies with other policy areas such as climate change adaptation). However, appropriate planning of such a regime’s scope and clear communication of its goals would be needed to ensure that the momentum to support biodiversity conservation is not lost and that an ecosystem-based policy regime does not become narrowly focused on ecosystem services only. Importantly, an increased focus on ecosystem services should not divert resources away from biodiversity conservation or displace development pressures onto them.

A number of existing EU policies could help to deliver a more ecosystem-based post-2010 policy regime. In particular, by safeguarding the variety and distribution of species and habitats (which are ecosystem “building blocks”), the EU Birds and Habitats Directives provide a good starting point for supporting the quality of broader ecosystems, including their functions, resilience and many of their services. Furthermore, the effective implementation of the Water Framework Directive, Marine Strategy Framework Directive and the pending Soil Framework Directives could also make substantial contributions to a more ecosystem-based policy regime. Technical measures such as Environmental Impact Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment could also help, by increasing their consideration of potential impacts on ecosystems and their services.

The paper concludes that the most successful post-2010 biodiversity outcomes will be probably best achieved by gradual policy developments, with the priority being the effective implementation of existing instruments. This should firstly focus on the establishment of a strong and comprehensive policy framework for conserving biodiversity and healthy ecosystems (e.g. their services) in the post-2010 era, possibly adopting a few targeted policies/instruments to address obvious gaps in the existing framework. An additional priority should be to increase the knowledge base on the status of European biodiversity and associated ecosystem services. Later on, a further step could be taken to carry out an evaluation of current legislative and other policy instruments that can help to conserve broader ecosystems in the EU. This would help identify remaining gaps and inform further assessments of the feasibility, merits and implications of potential options for more dedicated instruments for safeguarding European ecosystems.

References

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